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Colin Mitchell



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- 1 Originally hoping to provide the first systematic English-language biography of the renowned Safavid jurist Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, Colin Turner soon extended *Islam Without Allah?* to comprise a lengthy analysis of official and unofficial religious life in Iran during the Safavid period (1501-1722). Turner brings a provocative thesis to this study, namely that conventional understandings of faith, belief, and epistemology have been systematically skewed and misinterpreted since the earliest days of Sunni and Shi'ite doctrinal expression. The first chapter ("Belief and Submission Reconsidered") presents the thought-provoking argument that core concepts such as *iman* (personal or internal faith) and *islam* (personal submission to God) have been subsumed by an increasingly pedantic orthopraxy that champions corporate identity and behavior. This was concomitant with a sizeable shift in epistemological frameworks, whereby 'ilm – and its custodians the 'ulama – was no longer dedicated to experiencing and understanding God, and indeed had been hijacked by jurists (*fuqaha*) working with the patronage of secular authority. In this sense, the author presents religion in Iran, and arguably all across the Islamic world, as a historical struggle between those who understood their relationship with God on the basis of personal faith – the Internalists – and those who looked to liturgies and ritualized religious behavior – the Externalists.
- 2 In subsequent chapters, Turner analyzes this issue of internalism/externalism with respect to the Safavid mystical movement and its transformation in the 16th century to an imperial polity professing Twelver Shi'ism. Ironically, the externalists of Twelver Shi'ism (most notably 'Allama Hilli) had been codifying and systemizing Twelver Shi'ite doctrine 'outside' of Iran since the 13th century. Prior to the 1501-enthronement of Shah

Isma'il I in Tabriz, Iranian religious behavior had been characterized by 'non-externalist' religious permissiveness whereby Sunnism, high Sufism, and extreme proto-shi'ism (*ghuluww*) were allowed to co-exist and intermingle. For Turner, the key development with respect to a growing orthopraxy was the patronage and support by both Shah Isma'il and Shah Tahmasp of the Arab jurist, Shaikh 'Ali al-Karaki al-'Amili. Turner tracks the ensuing discourse between the indigenous Persian clerical elite and the externalist camp led by al-Karaki and others, and argues "the rise to the prominence of the *fuqaha* under the protection and patronage of the ruler...had delivered a serious blow to the religious permissiveness that had prevailed prior to the advent of the Safavids" (p. 97). A thorough explication of both externalist and non-externalist (apparently to be differentiated from 'internalist') writings is provided in the third chapter before turning to a detailed examination of the career and writings of 'Allama Muhammad Baqir Majlisi. Here, Turner's acerbity becomes manifest, and we read that Majlisi was in no way innovative or genuine, but rather a bigoted, narrow-minded hypocrite who cuddled up to an avaricious and immoral kingly court while at the same time lambasting Sufi gatherings and hospices as debauched dens of inequity which catered exclusively to heretics and deviants. Majlisi's *opus magnum*, the well-known collection of Imami sayings and actions known as the *Bihar al-anvar*, is seen as unoriginal, and furthermore containing "obvious fabrications" which "are likely to raise suspicions" (p. 172). It was thanks to a program of advocating Sufi repression in both public and elite circles, along with a vigorous campaign of Twelver shi'ite propaganda, that Majlisi was "able to draw on the general tendency of the Muslim masses towards the superficial, and, at the same time, fill the spiritual vacuum that had appeared as a result of the decline of the Sufi brotherhoods" (p. 250). To sum up, this is clearly a lively study of religious expression in a historical setting which unapologetically eschews any conciliation or accommodation to the juridical aspects which have characterized Twelver Shi'ism and Islam in general since the formative period of the 9th and 10th centuries.

- 3 Methodologically, *Islam Without Allah?* makes use of a wide number of sources that are often underused in Safavid historiography, including Shaikh 'Abd Allah Afandi al-Isfahani's bio-bibliography, *Riyad al-'ulama wa hiya al-fudala* ("The Gardens of the Knowledgeable and the Sacred Domains of the Learned"), and Mulla Sadra's *Sih Asl* ("Three Principles"). In terms of secondary sources, however, it should be noted that the author disregards a sizeable corpus of authoritative material which speaks directly to the issues he himself raises, namely the work of Wilferd Madelung, Sabine Schmidtke, Etan Kohlberg, Devin Stewart, Jean Calmard, Andrew Newman, Kathryn Babayan, and Rasool Ja'fariyan.

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Thèmes : 4.2.1. Safavides et Qâjârs

nompropre Safavides

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